

First Evangelical Lutheran Church
1401-05 14th Street
Intown Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5513

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7-ALTO,
103 "

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
FIRST EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Location: 1401-05 12th Ave. (southwest corner 14th Street and 12th Avenue), Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: First Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: The First Evangelical Lutheran Church (1896-97) was the last Gothic Revival-style church to be built in downtown Altoona. The fifth home of a congregation organized in 1834, the church was planned by Charles M. Robinson at a time when other downtown congregations were replacing their dated Gothic structures with more eclectic design schemes derived from a full spectrum of architectural traditions. In addition to displaying finely crafted clustered columns and other intricate woodwork, the church's well-preserved interior features some of Altoona's finest bevelled- and stained-glass windows, a myriad of multicolor floral, geometric and religious designs.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1896-97. Ground was broken April 3, 1896; the cornerstone laying ceremony took place July 18, 1896. The church was dedicated May 21, 1897.
2. Architect: Charles M. Robinson of Altoona. Although Robinson had a tremendous impact on Altoona's Victorian streetscape, little is known of his background or training. City directories indicate that by 1887 he was engaged in the practice of architecture in Altoona. In 1890-91 he associated with George L. Smith, with offices in the Masonic Temple. Robinson had several other partners--Snyder in 1893 and Crockett in 1896--and practiced alone in 1898 and 1900. Shortly after 1900, Robinson moved to Pittsburgh, where he established a partnership with George Winkler. (Polk, City Directory, 1890; Polk, Polk's Directory, 1896, 1898 and 1900)
3. Original and subsequent owners: First Evangelical Lutheran Church has owned the property since 1896.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The contractor was W. V. Hughes of Altoona.
5. Original plans and construction: The church was rebuilt to accommodate a growing congregation that numbered over 1,000 members.
6. Alterations and additions: The church has been repaired and remodeled several times. In 1904, a three manual pipe organ was installed, and other alterations undertaken, at a cost of \$7,500. During the same year, a parsonage was erected on an adjacent lot for \$6,500. This building is no longer extant. The chancel of the church was dismantled, removed, and rebuilt in 1949-50; a new Aeolian-Skinner organ was then purchased to replace the historic Pilcher organ. At the same time, all of the stained-glass windows

were cleaned and refurbished. An educational wing next door, on 12th Avenue, was built in 1971.

B. Historical Context:

Active in central Pennsylvania by 1805, Lutheran missionaries of German descent had organized the First Lutheran Church by 1834. Their earliest recorded church was a log house near what is now the intersection of 4th Avenue and 23rd Street; this 1830s building is no longer extant. In 1853--shortly after Altoona was plotted--the congregation purchased a lot on 11th Avenue between 14th and 15th streets, next to another lot that Archibald Wright had donated to the congregation through his son, John Wright. The First Lutheran Church and parsonage were erected on these two lots: the cornerstone was laid on July 23, 1853, and the building was dedicated on August 13, 1854. This two-story brick church, which measured 46' x 75', was in the Gothic Revival style, seated 750, and cost an estimated \$7,000.

By the 1890s, however, the brick church proved insufficient for the needs of the rapidly expanding congregation. A wave of religious enthusiasm had swept through Altoona in the late 1870s, swelling the ranks of the Lutheran congregation. Its temperance and missionary societies were thriving, as was the newly established Sunday School, which boasted an enrollment of 1,000.¹ Moreover, the church's proximity to the railroad tracks to the south, and the streetcars to the north, resulted in a noisy, distracting environment that was less than ideal for religious worship. The church decided to relocate and rebuild in what was then a tranquil, upper-class residential neighborhood, one block north of its current location on the main commercial street. Two adjacent lots were purchased on the southwest corner of 12th Avenue and 14th Street, and funds for the construction of the new building were raised through private subscription. Ground was broken April 3, 1896, and the church was dedicated on May 21, 1897.

Over the past 150 years, eight of Altoona's Lutheran congregations have descended from the First Church.²

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: A turn-of-the-century interpretation of the Gothic Revival style, this church combines rose and pointed-arched windows with Altoona's preferences for light, rough-faced ashlar and a cross-gabled form.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Foundations: Stone.
2. Walls: The limestone exterior is rough-faced, random-coursed.

¹Beeler, Richard E. A History of the First Evangelical Lutheran Church of Altoona, Pennsylvania (Altoona: Privately printed, 1955), 15.

²For a detailed discussion of each of these congregations, see "With the First Lutheran," Altoona Morning Tribune (May 24, 1897).

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ashlar. A frieze above the main entrance has incised quatrefoil designs. The tower in the northeast corner has a steeple which rises to a height of 60' and is covered with slate. At the northwest side of the facade is a smaller tower without a steeple. The cornerstone reads, "First Evangelical Lutheran Church Founded 1830, Built A.D. 1896."

3. Structural systems, framing: The church has stone bearing walls and wood joists.
4. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The entrance is formed by three pointed-arch doorways with tracery set in their upper portions. The side entrances are located in the first and fourth bays of the east facade.
 - b. Windows: The facade has a stained-glass rose window centered above the main entrance. Most of the other windows have pointed arches accentuated with smooth-faced ashlar trim.
5. Roof: The cross-gabled roof is covered with slate.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Three sets of double entrance doors lead to a vestibule containing a second group of three double doors, which in turn lead into the main auditorium. The pews are set in three aisles; the altar faces north. A curved balcony with a cast-iron rail and wood panels embellished with quatrefoil designs is located on the north wall of the church.
2. Stairways: The balcony is reached by paired wood staircases rising along the east and west walls of the building. The newel posts, turned balusters, and treads are all wood.
3. Flooring: New red carpeting in the entrance lobby and sanctuary; old red and black linoleum in the stairwell areas.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The auditorium has a wood wainscot, with the upper pine rail grained to resemble oak, and pine baseboards below. The walls and ceiling are plaster on lath.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: All of the first-floor doors are masterfully grained to resemble quartered oak. The vestibule doors have pointed arches with tracery in their upper portions, and are surrounded by clustered, engaged columns.
 - b. Windows: Small pointed-arch, stained-glass windows with tracery line the south wall behind the chancel. On the east and west walls, there are two larger, pointed-arch, stained-glass windows containing biblical scenes in their lower portions, and floral motifs in pale pink, green, blue, and fuchsia above. A row of three pointed-arched windows depicting stylized bouquets of lilies in pastel blues, violets, and yellow line the east and west walls of the

auditorium in the area behind the pews.

6. Original furnishings: The quartered oak pews are original.
7. Mechanical systems:
 - a. Heating: Steam.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: None located.
- B. Early views: None.
- C. Bibliography:
 1. Primary sources:

Altoona Morning Tribune:

"Cornerstone Laying," (July 20, 1896).

"The First Lutheran," (May 22, 1897).

"With the First Lutheran," (May 24, 1897), includes detailed historical accounts of the eight Lutheran congregations that descended from the First Church.

Altoona, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Co., Ltd., 1888.

Insurance Maps of Altoona, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn-Perris Co., 1894.

Insurance Maps of Altoona, Blair County, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1909.

2. Secondary sources:

Beeler, Richard E. A History of the First Evangelical Lutheran Church of Altoona, Pennsylvania. Altoona: Privately printed, 1955.

Clark, Charles B. Illustrated Altoona. Altoona: Privately printed, 1896.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the

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supervision of HABS historian Alison K. Hoagland and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian.